

I CAN

PAPER FOR SCRIBBLERS

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by

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A few months ago I joined a gym and was constantly surprised by how generously I was welcomed by the energetic regulars. New faces with new names – how I struggled to match them. Would I recognize them in the shopping centre out of leotards? Time and seeing them regularly has now overcome that. But there is a name for which I have never had a face and yet have not forgotten even though it would be more than 60 years since I first heard it. Mrs Doig

When my husband Don was transferred to Brisbane in 1964, as companies did at that time, we bought a simple spec home in a new estate in Kenmore, the western fringe of Brisbane. Houses were being completed rapidly and filled with young neighbors just like us. When we met Alan and Anne, transferred from Adelaide, Alan kept telling us how much he missed being an Apexian – how he was reluctant to leave Adelaide and Apex but, being on transfer, he had to.

Apex began in 1931 when 3 young architects wanted to make a contribution to their community. They could not join Rotary as Rotary would have only one member per profession so they created a service club for young men, 18 to 40. Members were not expected to have the financial resources frequently found in Rotary and Lions but they had skills and were willing to give them and their time to the community. The ideals of the Association of Apex Clubs were simple and remain so today:

- To make the ideal of service the basis of all enterprise
- To develop by example a more intelligent and aggressive citizenship.
- To provide means of forming enduring friendships, rendering altruistic service, and building better communities.
- To promote international understanding and friendship.

Together with Alan's neighbour Bill, Alan and Don decided to form a new branch of Apex. This took two years and on 23 March 1968 the Toowong-Kenmore Apex Club received its official charter as Club 543, District 1, Zone 6 – 25 young men united in wanting to help build their community. Naturally Alan was President, Bill as an accountant became Treasurer and that left Don as Service Director.

Their first community services were quite simple, such as painting a fence for an elderly couple. Enter Mrs. Doig. Mrs Doig was eager for Girl Guides in Kenmore to have a permanent home. She had spent years raising funds and they had plans for a simple rectangular building with a toilet and a small kitchenette.- Brisbane City Council would give them a lease of land adjacent to the kindergarten, Rotary was willing to pay for the concrete slab but, despite years of effort, they had only meagre funds to pay for the simple better block construction. Could Don and Apex help?

With his contacts in the building industry, Don sold the plea of the Girl Guides to various suppliers – the call was for supply at cost or below – and in this way the materials were found for construction: better blocks, timber, roofing, plumbing and electrical supplies. With qualified tradies as Apexians, planning could begin – frequently over beers at the pub, which was the lifestyle of the time! Naturally there was quite a lot of planning! What was decided was that they would build the hut in one day! This concept created great local interest. Rotary organized and paid for the concrete slab and a date was set for the big effort. . My recollection is that it was about May 1969. The Western Suburbs Advertiser was there and one of the TV stations featured it on the evening news. . Work started early and there was quite a crowd watching. By the time the roof was pitched and held up with acro props - to allow the blockwork to set - floodlights were on and the sun was setting. This long and tiring day finished with families joining for a barbeque. Everyone was happy – especially Mrs. Doig.

With only the addition of a small extension, that building is unchanged and has been in constant use for more than 50 years. Our daughters were Brownies but did not go on to Guides. So little given for so much benefit.

Kenmore at this time was a growing suburb demanding more services, such as an Ambulance station. The plaque by the window says 'This centre has been made possible by the Lions Club of Kenmore' but this is not the whole story. At the opening of the ambulance station on 7 November, 1972, Lions handed over a cheque for \$18,500 towards the cost of \$50,000. Much of this was raised by a raffle with perhaps a car as first prize, and Lions cold called by phone to sell tickets. Apex members then drove around collecting money and delivering tickets. For some years the badges of Rotary, Lions and Apex were on the wall inside, but disappointingly later they were removed.

Commented [GU1]: Not needed. Whiny

Apex needed to raise funds to support their community contributions so they began catering to crowds at the Brookfield Show.. Around 1973 they built the Apex Shed on the showground in a prime position overlooking the oval.. A simple structure, it was a large concrete slab with a bar at one end and a kitchen at the other which clearly represented division of labour typical of the time – men at one end and their wives and girlfriends at the other. The open covered space between these was well appreciated as so many of the 70s shows were wet. It is only in the last few years that improvements have been made to this building, so it has served the community well.

Being a young man's service organization, at that time Apex members were retired at 40. In the mid 90s we were no longer involved but were nevertheless sad when we learned that the Apex Club of Toowong-Kenmore had returned its charter due to no longer being able to attract sufficient members.

Apex introduced me to volunteering

I did not grow up in a volunteer family, our weekends were mostly spent with extended family. I had to learn by observation and participation. In the early days of

Apex it consumed a lot of Don's time and family time. There were days when I said Apex is a four-letter word and I did not mean that nicely. However without Apex there is so much I would not have done and enjoyed, such as years of camping in the Keppel group. I suspect that I was born with 'Secretary' tattooed on my forehead and that has given me entrée to assorted groups. What I learned was that being part of a team can be tiring but also a lot of fun, and it brings a lot of friendships. I am proud to say that all our children have always been volunteers. Grass roots sporting clubs, historical societies, landcare groups, CWA, school P&Cs, bridge clubs, - none of these could manage without volunteer support. These organisations are the fabric of suburbs and towns and everyone is richer because they exist.

With hindsight this loss of the Apex Club was predictable. About 2003 I kept hearing about a book by an American political scientist Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American society* analyzed American society between 1964 and 2000 in many ways and was frequently quoted by politicians. It claimed that in 1964 one in every eight families belonged to an indoor bowling league and they volunteered for causes they believed in. By 2000 society had changed and, instead of volunteering, they sent a cheque.

What I remember from reading this book is that he observed that those who volunteered in their youth volunteered for the rest of their lives. This now is the challenge – to encourage our youth to experience the benefits that flow from helping others. Television and technology have changed how people choose to use their free time. Economic pressures now require both partners to work and that free time is limited. It is pleasing to see that many schools require their senior students to contribute service hours each year. Scouts and Guides emphasise service to others. The Duke of Edinburgh Award program began in the United Kingdom in 1956 and came to Australia in 1959. Through a range of activities it builds personal skills, physical fitness, and community connection through non-competitive, self-directed challenges. These are all gateways to volunteering.

We have all just completed the five yearly national census. Some of the data will be predictable – it will show we have many houses with less people than bedrooms and it will show many more living alone. We hear that people are lonely, that there is a crisis of loneliness leading to both physical and mental health problems. Volunteers are never lonely – there is always something worth doing. I can say from experience that being a volunteer is more fun than just being a member of an organization. In contributing to a group or organization you share in the highs and lows and become a thread in that spiderweb of connections that makes a strong community. Without realizing it, you acquire skills that are useful later. . As a teenager I played tennis in a local club with six courts where I helped the captain organize rotating sets. When I had a small business of tennis coaching I used that system. Many people find that volunteering gives their life purpose. The benefits may be intangible but are nevertheless real.

Scribblers will remember when school tuckshops were run by mothers and those who were lucky enough to be part of this network understood how that school ran. Today there are paid convenors and staff and that opportunity is lost.

Community organisations can apply for grants from Council and the Gambling Community Benefit Fund. The need to pay labour is part of the grant application. Such grants are necessary for the survival of many organisations as people cry time poor and are less willing to volunteer. However, clubs and organisations that rely on volunteers to run them face today another problem – when paid staff are brought in to fill a need, volunteers feel their services devalued and many drop out. This was a major point of discussion when Toowong Bridge Club, then with a membership of about 900 and one of the largest clubs in Australia, considered having a paid convenor. Eventually they decided to remain with volunteers..

The Apex Club of Toowong-Kenmore has not vanished completely – a core group still has an annual reunion more than 25 years after their last official meeting and I enjoy being part of this. In terms of their initial pledges, they have formed enduring friendships.

One day another Mrs Doig will ask you for help. Just reply 'I can', you won't regret it.